

(notes transcribed
(from handwritten
notes) spring 1969 .

LESSONS

Patterns of U.S. Expectations

When VC were dormant, we always (1954-58) assumed they had been crippled; always inferred long-run capabilities from current activity visible to us.

(Thus, note assumption Tet '68 was the limit of their capability.)

Yet our intelligence apparatus was never able to pick up reliably VC preparation or organizing activity (especially on a timely basis, or with good estimate of scale): e.g., planning, training, stockpiling, recruiting, organizaing apparatus, indoctrinating, penetrating, rehearsing. Thus, these activities were invisible to us, and did not affect our estimates of ^{n m} capability (let alone intent, on which they bore directly).

Unfortunately, reductions in VC visible activity in the past always correlated with periods of great invisible, preparatory activity; so our estimates of declining VC capability came at moments when VC capability was increasing (in scope, effectiveness, readiness, or all) and was about to be used.

U.S. PATTERN OF EXPECTATIONS

Costs of loss depended on our estimate of domino effects: consider how much data/knowledge/(U.S. expertise that judgment reflected: of communists, of the nations involved, of the process... (note British and French disagreement with us in '54 over these, even applied to Malaya).

Estimates that the communists would lie low till after 1956 were right, and for right reasons -- we know now from interrogations, documents, as well as actions.

Thus, it was not as though we expected immediate Viet Cong pressure in 1954-57, and lack of that came as a surprise.

We foresaw force by DRV if and only if it were essential, last resort. We encouraged Diem to ensure this; but neglected to foresee result. What happened was exactly what was predicted in 1954-54 (though not what MAAG had prepared for.)

LESSON: Difficulty of getting USG to take seriously an "invisible" threat: no overt action against us.

e.g. Communists 1956-58
(1962-63)
(1966-67)
Buddhists 1961-63, 1966
Students 1963-64
FULRO 1964-65

We never foresaw "new" organization, other than by known elites. Or mass unrest.

(Inability to gauge tension in any police state: e.g. SV, East Europe!)

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Learned /
Reporting

LESSONS

U.S. Pattern of Expectations

Pessimism is fragile. Likewise realism. (Problem: how to protect, preserve, islands or moments of realism, objectivity, skepticism?)

(Note revolutionary Herter Award to John Paul Vann, 26 March, 1969)

Hypothesis: When pessimistic expectations are disproven, "surprise" quickly gives way to optimistic expectations

1954-56 pessimism → optimism 1956-58

1961 pessimism → 1962 optimism

(1965 pessimism → 1966-67 optimism) (not happy surprise)

Tet pessimism → Fall 1968 optimism

If we "make a try" despite pessimism, we proceed to build up an operating organization oriented to optimism and "progress" (and ignorant of basis for earlier, expert pessimism; and generally, more ignorantly "open-minded" than earlier estimates). Operators are not there to "try," to "do their best," or to "report objectively"; they are paid to make progress and to succeed. That is how they are judged and promoted.

PATTERNS OF U.S. DECISION-MAKING

What were our aims -- why did we get involved -- why did specific Presidents take the actions they did, when they did? This cannot be inferred from documentary inputs (or honestly, from minors).

Our need now is to avoid the consequences of evident failure: big failure; also the psychological/political costs of stalemate plus brutality, so far. Great responsibility rests on those who urged us to make a big public investment of resources in a situation where we were likely to fail; and on those who failed to foresee probability and forms of failure; on those who acted to increase the costs and impact of failure, even as the probability increased; and those who concealed or failed to warn of the increasing evidence and likelihood of failure.

Yet an irony is that at moments of decision, predictions were not optimistic -- 1954 Taylor Report, bombing, troops -- only later 1962-63, 1966 did optimism appear. Why were decisions taken despite gloomy predictions? Was the covert pattern: "If this fails -- which is likely -- we get out?" And then, system conspired to report, "It is working"; till new crisis, at which time the analyses were: "We can't get out -- at least, not till we've tried.... (an effort more costly and risky then would have been considered justified, earlier, before the recent increases in stakes).

Or was it, "If this fails -- which is likely -- we do something bigger?" (Rostow said bombing would be necessary: did he say it

would work?) Probably, at each stage there was a coalition between holders of these two views: but in each crisis, the previous proponents of "getting out, if..." had to concede, in light of increased stakes (larger than they expected.) [Compare the 1916 Flanders Campaign.]

Did John F. Kennedy ever accept possible eventual necessity for
a) bombing b) U.S. troops? [RFK says: NO.]

Long-run U.S. goal has always been the distinction of communist organizations; but in periodic crises we have focused on short-run goal of preventing imminent communist takeover, or the downfall of our anti-communist apparatus and program. We have always succeeded in latter aim: at ever higher cost. U.S. decisions during these crises have determined the shape of our policy.

What we haven't noticed is that it is our policy -- our neglect of other goals, and the way we have pursued our long-run goal -- that has assured the continued succession of crises, the recurrent prospect of the collapse of our efforts to contain, let alone to destroy, the communists. Nor have we noticed the pattern that in virtually every (1955, 1960-61, 1963, early 1965, 1966: mid-65 and early 1968 are exceptions) the immediate threat, never dealt with on any but an ad hoc, short-term manner, came from non-communist opposition to the GVN, which communist pressure merely exacerbated. And the impact of this non-communist resistance was as crippling to GVN/U.S. programs -- i.e., as beneficial to VC growth -- between crises, during our periods of optimum, of belief in "progress," as in the crises themselves: which

alone even enough to destroy all "progress," even if it had been more than illusory.